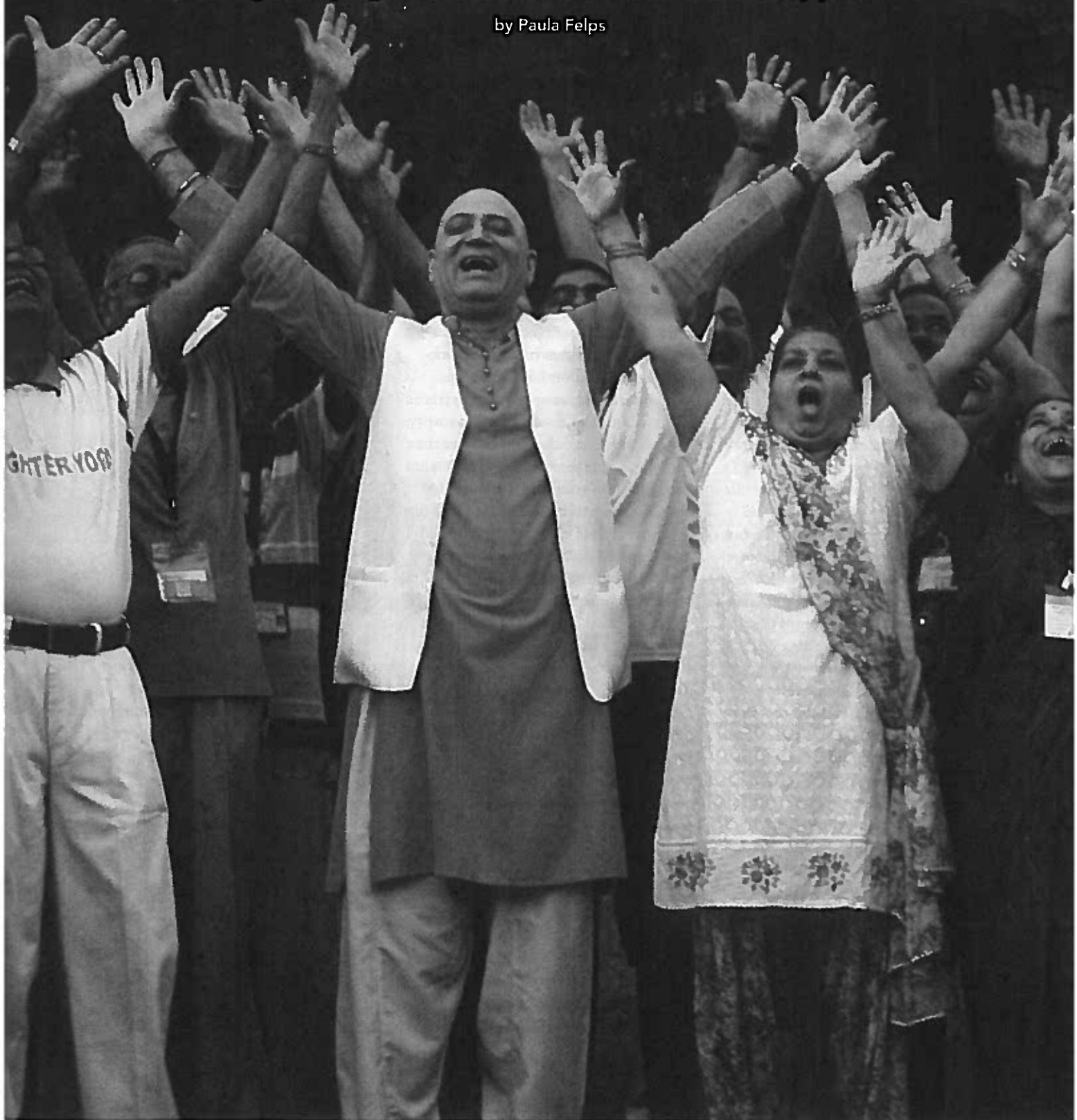


Laughing

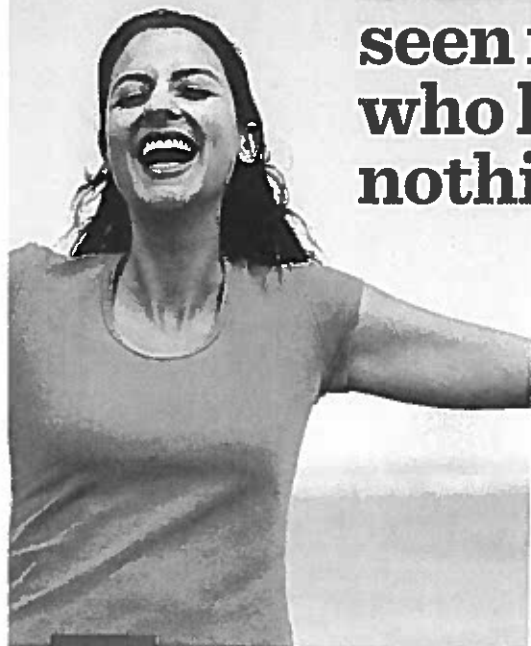
Is laughter yoga the answer for health and happiness?

by Paula Felps



“I can’t prove that laughter really is the best medicine, but I have seen many examples of people who have had results that are nothing short of miraculous.”

—Sebastien Gendry



Lori Stein might never have learned how to laugh if her husband hadn’t lost his job.

Right after he was laid off, he had to go back east, so I was left here with lots of time on my hands,” recalls the accountant from Pasadena, CA. Already battling clinical depression, and feeling lonely and overwhelmed by her circumstances, Lori remembered a woman who’d mentioned a laughter yoga club that met on Friday nights. With nothing to lose, she decided to check it out.

“From the moment I walked in, I knew this was for me,” says Lori. “It was so not who I usually am. I am so analytical and serious and literal, and this was the opposite of that. It was childlike and carefree. It was absolutely freeing for me.”

Lori made it her Friday night ritual, and when her husband returned home a few weeks later, he began attending with her. Now, almost seven years later, they both are staunch believers in the power of laughter yoga, making it a priority to attend weekly sessions. Not only has it

improved their marriage, Lori says, but it has helped her reclaim a sense of joy and youthfulness that she had forgotten existed. It has also helped her manage her depression, she says.

Lori is one of a growing number of devotees worldwide who have discovered the power of laughter yoga. Launched with just five participants in 1995 by Madan Kataria, a medical doctor in Mumbai, India, today the movement has grown to include more than 7,000 clubs worldwide.

This isn’t a simple chuckle or a quiet giggle; it employs what experts refer to as “mirthful laughter”—the kind of deep, shaking laughter that puts the whole body in motion. It is that full-body motion, according to the Mayo Clinic, that unleashes laughter’s greatest benefits.

In addition to freeing the mind, which provides instant stress relief, hearty, mirthful laughter stimulates the heart, lungs and other organs; it increases the endorphins released by the brain and heightens the intake of oxygen-rich air. Over the long term, evidence suggests, it also strengthens the immune system by releasing neuropeptides that help fight stress and other more serious illnesses.

Bridging Breath and Laughter

The notion that laughter has healing properties is nothing new; in his 1979 book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, Norman Cousins wrote about combating life-threatening illness with humor. As far back as the 1960s, Dr. William Fry of

Stanford University began publishing studies about the physiological processes that occur during laughter, also noting that they had a powerful effect on health and survival.

Inspired by existing research, Madan was writing an article about the benefits of laughter for a medical journal in the mid-’90s and, as he did more research, decided to start a laughter club in Mumbai. Gathering a handful of friends, they met in a park and told jokes.

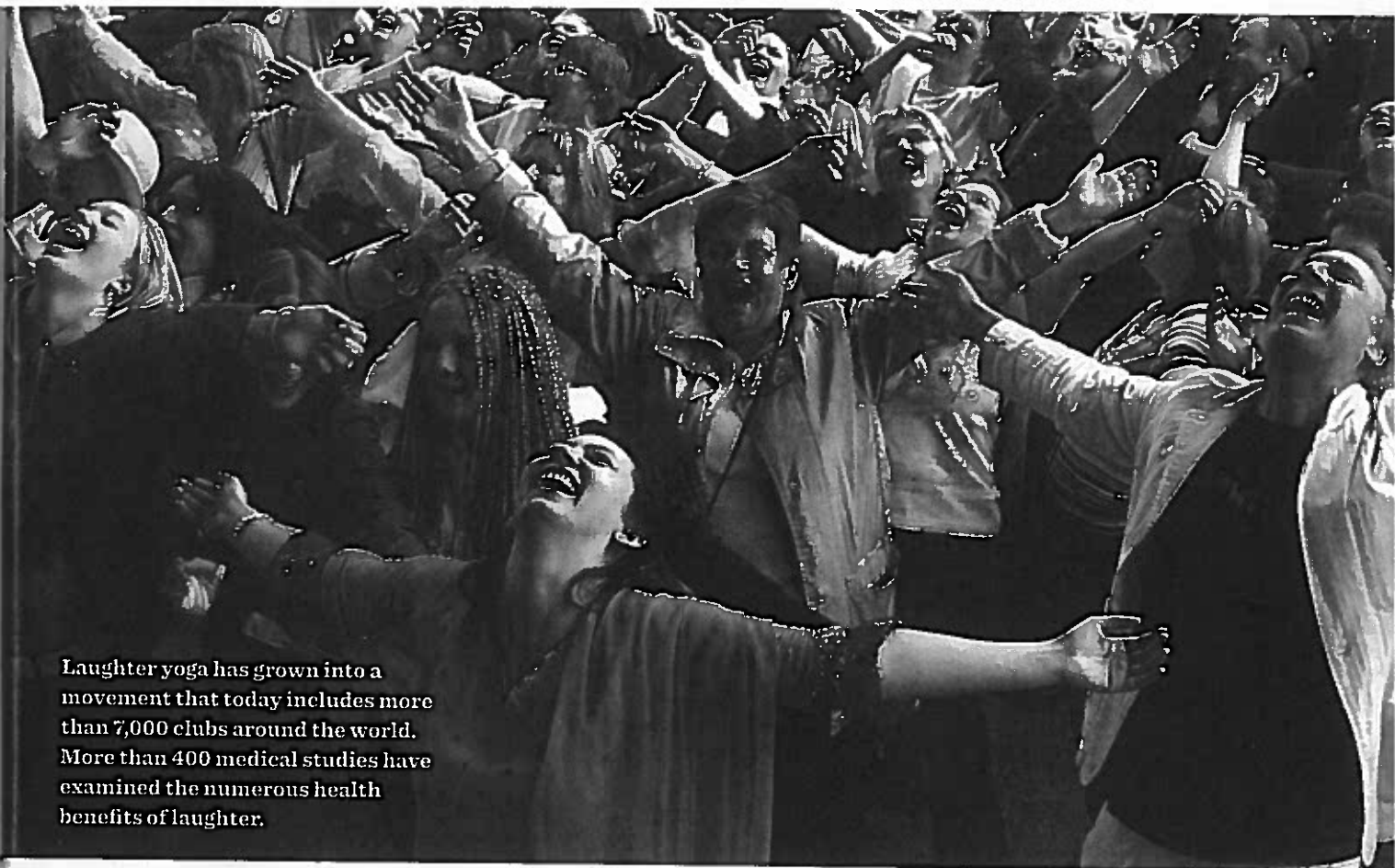
“It didn’t take long for us to run out of jokes, so I knew that humor was not enough,” he says. “I started searching for ways to laugh without humor.”

William’s research indicated that the human body cannot differentiate between genuine laughter and faked laughter, so Madan began looking at ways to create laughter—even in the absence of something to laugh about.

“If you act like a happy person, your body responds,” he says, “so I started trying different laughter exercises.”

His wife, Madhuri, was a yoga instructor and both of them were long-time yoga practitioners, so they implemented gentle yoga breathing, called pranayama, with the laughter to boost its health benefits.

“I never in my life thought it would become so popular,” he says. “However, there was a need for people that [laughter yoga] met. The stress in this world is too much, and people feel lonely. And they like laughter yoga because it’s simple—that’s why it works.”



Laughter yoga has grown into a movement that today includes more than 7,000 clubs around the world. More than 400 medical studies have examined the numerous health benefits of laughter.

Better Living Through Laughter

Madan isn't the only one who is taking laughter—and its effect on the mind and body—seriously these days. Swedish Covenant Hospital in Chicago is one of many hospitals worldwide that uses laughter yoga as complementary medicine. The hospital uses it as part of its pulmonary rehabilitation program in addition to implementing it into chemotherapy sessions for cancer patients. While cancer is no laughing matter, studies indicate that laughter might be just what patients need.

A 2003 study of cancer patients at Indiana State University Sycamore Nursing Center looked at how humor affected patients from both a psychological and physiological standpoint. The study showed that laughter had the ability to reduce stress and improve NK, or natural killer, cell activity. The study's final conclusion was that, since low NK cell activity is linked to a lowered resistance to disease and an increased morbidity rate

for individuals with cancer and HIV, "laughter may be a useful cognitive-behavioral intervention."

"Even after all this time, I remain shocked in a positive way by what I see," says Sebastien Gendry, founder of the American School of laughter yoga in Los Angeles, CA. Sebastien trained with Madan to become a laughter yoga teacher in 2004, then worked alongside Madan in India for two years.

"I can't prove that laughter really is the best medicine, but I have seen many examples of people who have had results that are nothing short of miraculous," he says. "The doctors can't explain it, but they can't deny that something happened in those sessions that had a major impact [on the person's health]. There is something of real substance that takes place when you experience laughter like that."

Laughing—particularly when combined with the breathing techniques used in laughter yoga—also expands the capacity of the lungs and oxygenates the body. As more oxygen reaches the organs, it helps flush out toxins while at the same time generating more energy and promoting overall relaxation.

And as much as it does for the body, Sebastien says, it's even better for the mind and soul.

"Healing the body is secondary to healing the mind," he says. "But the research is valid. In the past four decades, over 400 medical research studies and more than 4,000 psychological studies have been published about the healing power of laughter. The data is there."

Dr. Andrew Weil, one of the world's most respected experts on holistic health and founder of the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine, even testified before a Senate committee in 2010 that laughing—and laughter yoga in particular—could have a dramatic effect on the overall health of the nation and could help lower America's health care costs.

Andrew isn't alone in believing laughter could help lessen the effects of a wide range of ailments. A Japanese study published in the journal *Diabetes Care* discovered that test subjects with Type 2 diabetes—the most common form of the disease—were able to significantly lower

their blood sugar levels after a meal by watching a 40-minute comedy show that induced laughter.

Dr. Lee S. Berk, a well-respected researcher at Loma Linda (CA) University's School of Allied Health Professions and a pioneer in the field of laughter research, was one of the first to discover the positive effects laughter has on the endocrine system. Lee has published multiple studies showing that laughter can decrease cortisol levels, which leads to stress reduction, and increase production of antibodies for greater immunity. One of his more recent studies, presented at the 2010 Experimental Biology Conference in Anaheim, CA, even indicated that laughter may be useful in restoring the appetites of elderly patients who have become depressed and lost interest in food. His study found it could be an "accessible alternative starting point for these patients to regain appetite and, consequently, improve and enhance their recovery to health."

Laughing With Class

Sebastien says the growing evidence about the benefits of laughter have made people more eager to explore laughter yoga.

Classes follow the same basic structure, although each instructor may throw in his or her favorite "tricks" for generating laughter. Classes generally last for 45 to 60 minutes, and require no special equipment other than a bottle of water (laughing so much can dry the throat) and a willingness to leave inhibitions at the door.

There's plenty of clapping while chanting, "Ho, ho, ha, ha, ha!" followed by different exercises, done with a partner or as a group, designed to induce laughter. Fake laughter often erupts into uncontrollable giggles as participants let down their guard and

begin playing—and laughing—like children. Much of the time, it feels more like an improv comedy class than a yoga session.

"Each class is different because Dr. Kataria encourages teachers to be creative, but the basics of every class will be clapping, breathing, laughing, stretching—and of course, a childlike playfulness," explains Judi A. Winall, a certified Laughter Yoga instructor and leader of the Joyful Healing Laughter Club in Cincinnati. "It helps people, through play and laughter, get in touch with the joy that is in each of us. And when we tap back into that, it helps us stay connected, stay healthier and be happier."

"Laughter is a cathartic way to release emotions. It stimulates the parasympathetic system, which allows you to be able to let go. And that lets everything in our lives flow better," she says.

Patrick Murphy Welage of World Peace Laughter in Cincinnati, a teacher who discovered laughter yoga in Mumbai and learned it from Madan while it was still in its early days, has held workshops and retreats around the world. He also has taken it into prisons, universities and other high-stress environments to help release tension.

"People want to feel valued and validated. When you look into someone's eyes and laugh with them, you recognize one another's humanity," Patrick explains. "It's non-threatening and non-judgemental. It's like music; it transcends your culture, race, gender or sex and reminds you that we are all in this life together."

Some have sought to push the fitness aspects of laughter yoga, claiming that it burns up to 500 calories an hour. Others have equated laughing 20 times consecutively to working out with a rowing machine. Sebastien, however, is quick to dismiss such claims, noting their vague citations and lack of supporting data.



Patrick Murphy Welage of World Peace Laughter has taught laughter yoga at workshops and retreats around the world as well as at prisons and other high-stress environments.

"The idea is correct, but the numbers are not," he says, adding that there is nothing that can specifically measure calories burned through a hearty session of laughter. And, just as with any other form of activity, individual results may vary. However, he also recommends that people don't get too hung up on the numbers; what we do know, he says, is that it has a positive effect on the cardiovascular and immune systems, as well as the mind.

In other words, it can't hurt.

Sebastien predicts that the laughter yoga movement will continue growing and become more accepted in the U.S. Just as it has in India and other parts of the world, he expects to see it enter more mainstream settings. Part of the reason is that laughter feels good, it is an inexpensive form of stress relief and, as people discover its many benefits, he says they are hard-pressed to find reasons not to try it.

"At this point, there are so many studies on the impact of laughter that it's no longer a matter of whether or not laughter works," he says.

"It's a matter of when you're going to accept it." ■

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